

conservation in action

A “Big Year” for Rare Species



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(top) At Mori Point, two City College students plant rushes at a new pond that's now home to threatened California red-legged frogs. (bottom) The San Francisco garter snake, which eats red-legged frogs, may be North America's most endangered reptile.

From Mori Point in Pacifica to Lands End in San Francisco and all the way up to Tomales Bay, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) forms a patchwork of wild lands and historic sites in a region that is home to millions of people. That patchwork is also home to 33 species listed under the Endangered Species Act—more than in any other national park in the mainland United States. Brent Plater wants you to see them all this year.

Plater, an attorney and law professor who formerly directed Bay Area programs for the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity, is heading a team of volunteers to organize an endangered species “Big Year” for 2008 in the GGNRA. “The idea is to see as many species as you can within a defined geographical area,” explains Plater. On naturalist-led and individual outings, participants will engage in a friendly competition to check off each species.

There’s a catch: To count a species toward your total, you also have to take at least one concrete step to help in its recovery. That’s the lasting payoff of this Big Year—celebrating the region’s many rare creatures, but also addressing the unfortunate fact that they are in peril.

The Big Year does that by connecting people to ongoing efforts to protect and preserve these vulnerable species.

One such endeavor is already under way at Mori Point, a 100-acre site south of Pacifica that is one of the GGNRA’s newest additions. The Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy (GGNPC), a nonprofit that mobilizes support for the GGNRA, is working to create habitat there for threatened red-legged frogs and endangered San Francisco garter snakes. The snakes, with a population of between one and two thousand, are probably the most endangered reptiles in North America. This will be the largest new habitat created for the species by the GGNPC. “It’s the first time we’ve done something on this scale,” says Sue Gardner, director of GGNPC’s Site Stewardship Program.

There’s much to do. Hardly pristine, Mori Point has been the site of farming operations, sand and gravel mining, an illegal off-road vehicle track, and a Prohibition-era speakeasy. A pair of test ponds dug in 2004, however, gave reason for optimism. “Even though [the ponds were] small, the frogs moved right in,” says Gardner. So did the San Francisco garters, which prey primarily on red-legged frogs. Now, GGNPC is excavating two large new ponds. Volunteers and staff will plant thousands of native plants around the ponds’ fringes to provide cover for frog eggs and adults. The plants, primarily wetland species, need to take root between mid-January and early March, so this is an excellent early activity for Big Year competitors.

Late winter is also a great time to witness the spawning run of the threatened Central Coast steelhead, whose population in Marin County’s Lagunitas Creek watershed has plummeted to just 10 percent of its size of 50 years ago. Dams built in the 1950s and ’60s destroyed or blocked as much as half the steelhead’s spawning grounds, and the fish’s survival in Marin today is thanks in no small part to the Salmon Protection and Watershed Network (SPAWN), which also works to protect endangered coho salmon here. Since the late ’90s, SPAWN has rescued juvenile fish from drying creeks, restored habitat, and monitored populations.

“We’ve rescued more than 17,000 fish,” says director Todd Steiner, “and created spawning beds all over the watershed.”

Along Lagunitas and San Geronimo creeks, Big Year participants will help the fish by planting on stream banks, which stabilizes banks and slows water flow, protecting egg sites from scouring floods. The shade cools the water for temperature-sensitive juveniles and attracts the small invertebrates they eat.

This year will be full of opportunities to see the GGNRA’s imperiled species and contribute to their recovery. To find out more about the GGNRA Big Year challenge, go to www.ggnrabitbigyear.org for listings of upcoming expeditions and ways to get your hands dirty. 🐾

To learn more about the GGNRA’s listed species, see the booklet between pages 20 and 21.